

## Oral History Interview Transcript

**Interviewee: Marnie Roadburg**

**Date: 22/08/16**

**Location: Edinburgh**

**Time: 00:35:26**

**Interviewer: Aoife Keenan**

**Time period: 1970s, 1980s**

**Groups: Edinburgh Women's Aid**

**Roles: refuge worker (paid position)**

*Ok, so, can you describe what your connection was to Women's Aid and why you got involved with Women's Aid?*

I worked for Women's Aid about 6 years, 6 and a half years, and I was trying to find my CV today cause I couldn't remember exactly when I started but I think it was '77, maybe '76, and ... why I got involved? Em ... I was very involved in the women's liberation movement at the time. I was looking for another job and Women's Aid was still fairly young in Edinburgh and, em ... They had some posts advertised because they got some money from the Manpower Services Commission, it was a special scheme set up, and they were just about to, em, employ about eight people to extend Women's Aid beyond Edinburgh into Midlothian, East Lothian and, hopefully, eventually, West Lothian. So I applied for one of the jobs and got it and my job, initially, was to work in Midlothian to set up a refuge there so I worked with another woman called **[name anonymised]** and we, em, set up the refuges ... a refuge, first of all, in Midlothian then did some work in East Lothian as well and then I moved back into Edinburgh. I mean, the reason I got involved was that it was just very important to me because of what I was doing in the rest of my life, Women's Aid was all part of it, it was a practical solution to doing some of the things that we were campaigning for at the time around general, um, women's rights and, of course, domestic abuse ... Such a big thing ... still is, em ... But it was just really important to me so it was, it was a really good job to get for me because it fit with all of my beliefs and my lifestyle.

**00:02:22** *Ok, so you've kind of touched on this already, but what were the different ideas connected with Women's Aid that were particularly important to you and ... maybe ... where did you get them from?*

Well ... I mean, um ... No woman should be abused for whatever reason, and, you know, the Dobashes were doing their research at the time and it was quite shocking that 25%, I think it was 25% of all reported crime was domestic abuse and, um ... I've forgotten what your question was ... Why...?

*I guess if there were just any, kind of, particular, um, political ideas that you held or that were connected with Women's Aid, or any kind of...*

Well, yeah ... I believed very much in equality and it wasn't there, and a lot of women were being abused and a lot of men were abusing their power and, you know, I thought if I could play some role in trying to make a change there. You know, I think we were all very idealistic and thought we could do more than we could. We did a lot, we did a huge lot, but I think we also just thought, you know, we're going to change the world pretty quickly, um ... So it fit with all my political ideals about equality, really.

**00:04:08** *Ok, can you tell me about a day in the life of your Women's Aid group?*

Oh my god [laughs], em, a typical day? Or just...?

*Well, let's start with a typical day and then you can ... you can maybe go on from that.*

I don't think any day was typical. You never knew what was going to happen, em ... We just worked flat out, I mean, we just worked really hard and we were never away from the job and, and that's the way we wanted it to be but I don't think it was right in retrospect, so ... And that's not really answering your question but I think it's a really important point to make. We worked as a collective, and at the time I thought it was the right thing but it was very frustrating. So any decisions that were made and anything that we had to do had to be agreed by everyone and, and ... it just drove us crazy. I think it had its good points, but not all. So, a day could be anything from going into the office and recording statistics and meeting with the rest of our colleagues which could be quick or it could last all day because everyone had to be involved in every decision that was made so that was really counterproductive I think. Em, it could be then, depending on what your job was, what your role was

at the time, it could be going out to the refuges and helping women sort out, you know, stuff like helping them get housing, get social security, doing stuff with kids, that kind of thing, so that could take up a lot of time, going to appointments with women, taking women to see houses and that kind of thing. Or it could be going to someone's house if you were called out and bringing them back to the refuge which would then involve a whole lot of other stuff. It could be going with the police to help someone get their belongings from their house. It could be negotiating with social work over children who might have been taken into care. It was hugely varied in terms of the ... The one-to-one work we were doing with children, and some of it I have to say was pretty risky and pretty hair-raising, you know, going to locked houses, going in with women, throwing all their clothes in bags, taking off with men chasing us that kind of thing. You know, it could be dangerous, uh ... Or it could be campaigning and it could be going along and speaking at a local council meeting to try and get a refuge set up. Because I started working in Midlothian and there were no refuges there so we had to find ourselves accommodation, em, and then start liaising with all the local people and the council to try and set a refuge up, so a day there could be on all of that, doing all that kind of thing or recruiting volunteers to work with so there was no typical day but there was a lot, a lot of different things, a lot of variety.

*Yeah.*

**00:07:59** And it depended, because initially, because when I was employed things changed a bit because they started to, um, specialise a bit in who did what so myself and **[name anonymised]** were employed to set up a refuge in Midlothian, a couple of other women were employed to be education workers and a couple of other women were employed to be counselling workers, so it depended what your role was but then invariably ... Well, when we set up the refuge and finally got one then we were doing all the work with individuals there or we were working and supporting women in the community before they had a place to go even if it was just into local homeless accommodation or somewhere else. So, em, I would say it, kind of, depended on what your role was at the time and then there was a lot of overlapping.

*And how did you find that kind of variation of work? Was it...*

**00:09:10** Oh, I liked it because I like doing everything and being totally immersed in it and totally involved in everything so that, that suited me ... and I liked the bit about establishing a refuge where

there wasn't one. it was so badly needed in Midlothian and women were, you know ... It was just around the time of the Homeless Persons Act being enforced and there were women staying in the most awful, awful homeless accommodation that was really unsafe and just ... dreadful. So ... it was good when we ... I, I don't remember how long it took us to get the first one open, probably about a year. But I did like the variety, yeah.

*So, you've mentioned this a bit already but could you tell me a little bit about your links with external organisations? So you've mentioned the police and social work, how that worked ... Or anyone else that you worked with...?*

Em, it depended on who, you know ... Some were great some weren't. I think the police, well I know the police, were a lot less understanding about domestic abuse then, em, than they are now and we had women in the refuge who were wives of policemen, you know, but – and I'm sure that's still the case – but they were a lot less understanding. So, it depended on individuals, it really did and, you know, you would often...

**00:10:47** I remember one time going with a woman to her house to get her belongings and the police agreed to escort us so they went in their car behind us and I drove the car. We got to the house and she had her keys but he had put one of these chain lock things on so we couldn't get in and I just thought, 'What can we do? She's got to get her stuff. There's this tiny window of opportunity and the police just stood [there], they wouldn't do anything but I just took out a pair of scissors and picked the lock and, you know, when I think about it now I just think, 'God!'. Anyway, they just stood by because they weren't gonna bother as long as we got in and we just got black bags and filled them and put them in the car and then the husband came and found us and so, you know, we were really frightened and got in the car and were racing through Edinburgh and the police just left us. I just ... I thought that was appalling. I mean, they went to the house with us but as soon as he turned up they left us so you never knew. I thought they were being really supportive to begin with and then they just left us and fortunately we lost him and she got into the refuge and all of that but colleagues of mine were caught out like that so many times, you know, throwing children through windows and things. I mean, it was ... We did stupid things but we ... So, we ... There were people who were very good and people who weren't. Same with social work, fantastic in some cases and others just ... didn't really understand, didn't want to. With the councils, again, you would have councillors who were on your side and councillors who weren't, um. I don't think we were terribly

diplomatic in the way we ... I'm surprised that we got what we did is what I have to say because I wouldn't, I wouldn't negotiate, if you could even call it that now, in the way we did then but we were just so full of idealism. It was gonna happen no matter what, um, so I think sometimes we didn't do women a favour... But I think, to get back to your original question, it's mixed really and I, I just have a feeling that things are better now. I certainly think the police have got better training and much better understanding, em. I know it's not perfect but it was pretty bad back then.

*Ok. During your time with Women's Aid did you and your group have links with Scottish Women's Aid...?*

Yes.

*...and if so what was that like?*

**00:13:59** Oh, it was good. They were very supportive. It was really good. **[Name anonymised]** was, uh, Scottish Women's Aid coordinator at the time and she was brilliant and, yeah, we got a lot of guidance from them and had very close links.

*Ok. Can you talk a little bit about your views of Women's Aid's work with children?*

Well, when I was there I don't think we did very well at that at all, not at all, because we were so focussed on the women and we didn't have the resources and we didn't have the know-how and we did try and certainly years later, after I left, they started to employ children's workers but I don't think we did at the time. I don't think we did a good job. Having said that, an amazing thing happened to me a couple of years ago because I now work as a humanist celebrant and so I conduct funerals and weddings and namings and I was at a wedding fair because we have to do this occasionally. It was absolutely horrific. I just hate it [laughs] but this guy was running a stall beside us and, um – 'cause he does discos – and he came up and he was chatting to me afterwards and he kept saying, 'You look really familiar. Where did you work before?' and we kept talking about where we'd worked before and suddenly he remembered me. He had been in one of the refuges when he was a young child and he remembered me working for Women's Aid and I was just, um, I was just amazed because I thought if any of the kids remembered us they probably wouldn't remember us that fondly but it was just wonderful and then about 6 months later he emailed me and asked me to

conduct his wedding and so I then got to meet his mum again who'd been in the refuge all those years ago, like 30 years ago. So I guess it wasn't all that bad.

*Mmhm.*

But I don't think we did a great job to be honest. I just think ... The refuges were too crowded, all the women in one room with all their kids and then, you know, three families in one refuge and ... It was really hard for them.

*So what would you have liked to have seen instead?*

Well, I think more dedicated children's workers who really understood what the kids were going through. And, you know, there were things happening that we knew about but we weren't, we weren't ... experienced enough to know how to deal with, um, things like incest. We just ... We were too inexperienced, we didn't know how to deal with it. I remember a woman trying to talk to me, I know now what she was trying to talk to me about but at the time I felt a bit uncomfortable and I didn't know how to deal with it but she said she'd gone back to her house to get her belongings and she saw her daughter's nightgown on the bed ... I knew what she ... I kind of knew what she was telling me but I didn't know how to go there and then if I did I wouldn't know how to deal with it and I just think ... So ... The women needed support if they were gonna tell you things about how their kids might have been being abused. We, the workers, needed to know how to deal with that and where to refer people if needed and then, you know, in the refuge there were lots of kids with huge behavioural problems because of everything they saw and witnessed and experienced and I don't think we ... Well, I know we didn't have the expertise to deal with that well enough. I think we did alright but I'm hoping that Women's Aid is doing a better job of it now.

**00:18:35** *Em, do you remember any media stories on domestic violence during your time at Women's Aid or what the perception in the media was of domestic abuse, domestic violence?*

Well, it was pretty much played down. The Dobashes reports were out and at conferences but it was only people who were interested and in the know who would go along to those so I don't think it was terribly favourable. If anything, it wasn't, you know ... I don't think, I don't think there was a huge belief behind what we were trying to say but on the other hand we were able to convince councils to set up refuges and we were able to make a difference there but I don't, I don't recall any

big media coverage no. There was big media coverage of course in England with Erin Pizzey and her refuges in Chiswick but, em, but not up here.

*Can you describe any maybe significant turning points or any significant times of change and how they were managed by the Women's Aid Group?*

**00:19:56** Um, well, there were a number of things. The Homeless Persons Act, legal things I think which made a difference, that made a difference so we were able to argue and say that, you know, women, em, abused women were homeless and that they should be treated as homeless and we were able to, kind of, use the law to, to help women either get into homeless accommodation or make a case for setting up refuges to act as a stepping stone. So I think there were some legal changes like that, the Matrimonial Homes Act and that came in I think that was the early '80s which ... I'm just trying to remember it all. But there were, em ... I think then that cohabiting couples had equal right to the matrimonial home at least for a while even if ... Yeah, there were things like that that made a difference, um ... Sorry, what was the question again? What things...

*Just any, kind of, significant moments of change, external or internal or...*

Yeah, so ... I think some of the legal things like that were changes that we could use to campaign for better things to happen, um ... Internally ... During my time ... It was ... There weren't any big . There should have been in the way we worked but there weren't. You know, we had no, um ... We had no working terms and conditions. We just ... We had no pension. We just worked. When we went on call we'd leave the office at 4 o'clock on a Friday, we'd be confined to our flat, wherever we lived, 'til 10 o'clock on Monday taking calls and just ... You know, there'd be two of us on call, one with the car and one taking calls and you just knew you had to have food in for the weekend and that was it. I mean, we just ... It was a bit crazy. So that continued for the whole time that I was at Women's Aid and I know things have changed now and I think that will be better but internally I just ... I don't know. I suppose, when we got refuges set up outside of Edinburgh those were big changes that made a big difference and then, you know, women were able to stay in their own locality or they were able to move around so that they wouldn't be found and there were more of them so that was good. I just can't think of any other significant ... If I do, I'll come back to it.

**00:23:15** *Yeah, that's ok, we can come back to it. And what about the changes in Scottish politics in recent years? Do you think this has had any impact on the work of Women's Aid or on how domestic abuse is talked about?*

I don't know because I don't know what Women's Aid are doing just now on that. I really am, you know, a long way away from it. I think domestic abuse is being talked about quite differently than when I worked in Women's Aid. I mean, I do follow stuff in the papers and I think that, um, the police seem to be saying more of the right things and doing more of the right things in terms of training and so I think there are better messages getting across. I don't know though how that is impacting on, on women's day-to-day lives and I don't know how it's impacting on Women's Aid because I'm, I'm just not involved in it at the moment. Um, I would hope that there's more equality just because of the way politics are here at the moment but I, I don't ... I can't actually say.

*Ok, and what do you think the future holds? What would you like to see happen next?*

Specifically for...?

*For Women's Aid, or for women in general, or ... in the area of domestic abuse?*

**00:24:49** Well, I mean, I would like to see there ... us not have a need for refuges but, you know, I've been saying that for 40 years and I don't know if we're any, if we're any closer to that, um. I just think, you know, in 2016 it's diabolical that we should still, that women should still have to leave their homes, take their kids, leave their belongings, leave everything behind them, em, so, you know, that to me is, is ... Well, it just doesn't feel like a huge amount of progress if that's still the case and I know it is. So, I'm sure that the ideas of Women's Aid now are pretty much the same as when I worked there and ... I don't know figures and I'd be interested to know through this project whether things are changing or not and I just don't know, I don't know. I meant to do a bit of research before this interview but I just haven't had time.

*That's Ok, it's not...*

Well, no, but I am, I am interested because I, I'd like to know whether, you know, 1 in 4 women are still abused, because if they are, well, I had a quick, very quick look at Women's Aid website and it said that and I'm appalled because that means things haven't changed and does it mean that more women are now coming forward or does it mean ... You know, what actually is happening? I don't

know. So, I'm hoping that more women feel that they can go to a safe place. I'm hoping that more women feel that they deserve to do that, you know, because, you know, so many women – well, they still will – but so many women blamed themselves for the abuse that they were, that they were undergoing. I hope that that's changed a bit but I don't know. I just see the way young girls dress now and what they're ... I don't mean that, I mean the way they, they're still ... So many of them are really confident but so many of them are still, still, kind of, into these particular roles that are not much different than when I worked in Women's Aid 30 years ago. So, I don't know. It's a good question and I'd be interested to know what the position is at the moment myself.

*So is there anything else that you want to share about your time at Women's Aid that you've not done yet? Is there anything else that you remember that you would like to share?*

**00:28:09** Well, I think I ... It was an amazing time. It was really an amazing time because those of us, all of us, that worked there were very idealistic. It was our life and our life was ... Our life and our work were not separate and I've never had a job quite like that and I'm still close to people I worked with then because we just were so ... It was just so important for us to do what we were doing and although it, you know, there were lots of things wrong with it, like the fact that we had no conditions of employment and the collective working was pretty much a nightmare, it was, it was a great thing to be doing and a lot of the women who came through the refuges then stayed on and worked with us as well and that was just fantastic and, and ... What have I not shared with you? I think we ... I did mention this ... I think we took a lot of risks. I think we took too many risks and maybe often didn't help women in the best way by doing it. The very first thing I did when I got my job at Women's Aid was to go with one of the other workers, who was more experienced, out to ... Our plan was to go meet a woman in her house with her husband in **[location anonymised]** and we were going to sit down and have a conversation with her and her husband and tell him he was doing the wrong thing, basically, and that he should lay off [laughs]. I mean, you know, the nerve of it. We were just gonna go in there and we were gonna sort it, not even thinking then what might happen to her after we left. So we went out, we went to the house and, em, she was there but her husband was in the pub and we said, 'That's alright, we'll go and get him'. So we marched off to the pub, dragged him out of the pub, took him home, sat him down with her and proceeded to tell him that he was in the wrong and he shouldn't be doing this and who knows what happened to this woman after? We completely ... I mean, the guy deserved everything he got but it was not the right thing 'cause we completely humiliated him in the pub and in his home and then we walked away and ... I just hope that that's

not happening now. I don't think it is but we just did crazy things like that thinking that, you know, and then we could walk away from it. So I hope that that's not happening now. But our, kind of, enthusiasm and our idealism just carried us along but, you know, we did, we did some amazing things, you know. Lots of women got out and lots of women, um, and their kids got out, started new lives, got homes of their own. Lots went back but lots left again when it was the right time. I think one of the good things that we did was to not be judgemental. We kind of were but we always accepted women back and if they went back, well, they went back but we just always hoped they'd come back or leave or find a way to leave. I don't know what else to say. There was ... It was quite an amazing time to be at the beginning of it and setting it all up but it was not always the easiest or the best for women and there was not a lot of understanding on what their needs were and so it wasn't easy to get housing, it wasn't easy to get social security, it wasn't easy to get, um, help for the kids. So the women who went through the refuges and made it were really strong and really quite amazing.

*And you talked a little bit about the, the way the collective worked. Do you want to talk about that a little bit more? You said there was pros and cons?*

Well, I mean, yeah. I went into it thinking collective working is the best way and, you know, we're all equal in this and we all make decisions together and it'll all be fine and it wasn't always because we spent too much time agonising over every decision and, you know, different people had their strengths and weaknesses and we didn't allow for that. Everyone had to have a say in everything that was going on and we didn't recognise that some people would be good at some things and other people would be good at other things so ... And the day-long meetings that we had were a nightmare, um ... **[Section removed at request of interviewee 00:33:48].**

*Ok. Well is there anything else that you'd like to chat about or...?*

I don't think so but maybe you can tell me more about the process now, what's happening.

*Absolutely, yeah. So I'll just stop recording now.*

**End interview**